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PROCEEDINGS OF THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON

Meeting of April 17, 1917

THE 511th regular and 38th annual meeting of the Society was held at the New National Museum on April 17. After approving the reports of the secretary, treasurer and auditing committee the society elected the following officers for the ensuing year:—President, Mr. William H. Babcock; Vice-president, Mr. Francis La Flesche; Secretary, Miss Frances Densmore; Treasurer, Mr. C. N. B. Hewitt; Councillors, Mr. E. T. Williams, Mr. Neil M. Judd, Dr. Truman Michelson, Mr. Felix Neumann and Dr. I. M. Casanowicz.

Memorials to members of the society deceased during the past year were then presented. A sketch of the life of Gen. Ellis Spear, an active member of the society, was read by Mr. Wm. H. Babcock. The memorial to Mr. S. M. Gronberger, an associate member, was prepared and presented by Mr. James Mooney, and that to Mr. J. D. McGuire, an honorary member, was prepared and read by Dr. J. W. Fewkes. Tributes to Prof. Johannes Ranke and Prof. Gustave Schwalbe of Germany, honorary members, were given by Dr. Aleš Hrdlička, and a review of the life and work of Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, a corresponding member of the society, was read by Dr. John R. Swanton, tributes to Dr. Tylor being also given by Dr. Truman Michelson and Dr. Leo J. Frachtenberg.

The delivery of the address of the retiring president, Dr. John R. Swanton, on "Some Anthropological Misconceptions," was postponed to a special meeting of the society to be held on May 1.

Meeting of May 1, 1917

THE 512th meeting of the Society was a special meeting held on May 1, in the Natural History building of the National Museum to hear the address of the retiring president, Dr. John R. Swanton, whose subject was "Some Anthropological Misconceptions."

Dr. Swanton began by calling attention to the cyclic nature of cultural movements and stated that like other beliefs the doctrine of evolution which so dominates the thought of our time is subject to the same law and bound to have its rise, decline, and disappearance as an object of peculiar interest, and that the truth embodied in it will in time

become so axiomatic that no particular attention will be paid it while the chaff will disappear.

Unfortunately when pioneer anthropologists began to apply evolutionary ideas to their science, then in its infancy, they fell into a serious error. They assumed, with some justice indeed, that the existing peoples of the world presented features some more and some less primitive, features which might be arranged into series showing the stages which mankind as a whole had passed through, but in selecting the "most primitive" features they worked on the false assumption that that which was most foreign to the ideas of the society in which they lived, in the cultural center of western Europe, were the most primitive. This resulted in a vast crop of pseudo-scientific evolutionary theories each based on its author's own peculiar understanding of what was more and what less primitive. An assistant source of error was an over earnest attempt to find survivals analogous to the "vestigial characters" of biology in all kinds of cultural features, many of which were not vestigial at all. The speaker referred to several evolutionary theories of this kind, treating at some length those regarding the evolution of totemism from a matrilineal clan system, the evolution of marriage from a primitive promiscuity, and several theories concerning the origin of religion, such as those of Spencer, Tylor, Frazer, and Lang.

Secondly, the author took exception to the extreme uniformitarian attitude taken by certain anthropologists. He called attention to the fact that absolute uniformitarianism is impossible since even the inorganic world is based on discreted molecules, atoms, electrons, etc., while the organic world is based on independent organisms. In the same way when we turn to the culture history of mankind we find that ideas, although progressive, do not roll into consciousness with the even motion of a wheel but come at certain definite times and places.

Along with this extreme uniformitarianism he believed too much stress had been placed on the unconscious or subconscious side of evolution in human institutions. Important as the latter undoubtedly is and much as it is neglected by the man of average intelligence, it acts less toward the development of new institutions than toward the preservation of institutions already in existence, and is accompanied rather by degeneration, or at most imitation, than by absolute origination.

In this connection Dr. Swanton took occasion to criticize a certain type of student who, because he observes the powerful effect of subconscious imitation, assumes that there is an extra-mental current which settles all problems, and looks cynically upon conscious efforts to bring

about change. When examined microscopically this seemingly unconscious current would be found to be a resultant of forces, each of which was the decision of some individual or some group of individuals at a definite time and place. He believed that if any of these decisions had been different the stream itself, the course of history, would in some measure have been different.

In the discussion which followed the address Dr. Leo J. Frachtenberg agreed in main with the assertions made by the speaker. He called attention to the fact that the error of particularization is well exemplified in Westermarck's *Origin of Primitive Ethics*. Dr. Frachtenberg expressed the belief that the principle of unconscious evolution should not be underestimated. Dr. Truman Michelson added as another misconception the supposition that the languages of primitive peoples indicate a low mentality, stating that it is possible to express complicated ideas by means of these languages but that the ordinary life of the people does not require such expression. Another misconception, according to Dr. Michelson, is the arranging of languages in a scale of superiority with inflectional languages as the highest point of development.

In closing the discussion Dr. Swanton stated that although it is true that the unconscious element plays a very important part in the evolution of culture its functions are conservative, or, at most, imitative with a tendency toward degeneration, whereas the conscious element is that which creates, that which produces positive advances.

FRANCES DENSMORE, *Secretary*